

DINING BOOM

When Australians aren't cooking, they're discovering new ways to eat out. For a nation obsessed with food, the vast offering is only getting better. Welcome to the age of fun dining. LINDY ALEXANDER reports

We've all heard of the mining boom, but there's a new exploding industry in Australia, and this time what's pulled from the ground ends up on our dinner plates. We're experiencing a 'dining boom': as a nation, we now spend \$45 billion each year on eating out and the average Aussie does so two to three times a week.

Heading out to eat has become a hobby in Australia, and while all generations take part, adults under 34 are particularly enamoured, spending more than \$100 a week dining at restaurants or ordering in. "According to research we completed at NewsCorp [publishers of *delicious.*], millennials would rather attend a food festival than a music festival," says Kerrie McCallum, editor-in-chief of the *delicious.* brand.

Dining out has become an egalitarian experience. "All Australians should be able to celebrate our thriving dining scene and incredible produce," McCallum says. "Fine dining is not the only way to enjoy wonderful food, and even though that will always be important, Australians have a varied array of needs when they eat out. It may be they want to eat well with their children, or find a place they can take the entire family for a grandmother's 80th."

McCallum suggests the recent dining boom is due to several factors. "Firstly, our produce is second to none - the vast range of what is available in Australia is incredible, from the earth to the dairy to the paddock to the sea. Chefs have this amazing bounty to work with, and that's producing high-quality meals, from casual experiences to fine dining."

Australia's produce is in high demand internationally, as well. The rising middle classes in Asia have boosted fortunes of regional Australia. While iron ore and coal export prices took a hit in 2017, the healthy gains in dairy, cereal and fish have seen the 2013 prediction of billionaire packing

and recycling entrepreneur Anthony Pratt - that a dining boom would follow the mining boom - become a reality.

McCallum believes that, because Australia is unbound by a traditional cuisine, we're not constricted in the kitchen. "It means chefs here have the freedom to be creative and write their own rules," she says.

Matt Moran, the chef and owner of Aria, Chiswick, North Bondi Fish and other restaurants with the Solotel Group, says people are becoming more engaged with food, and he attributes the burgeoning eat-out scene to convenience, great weather that entices people outside, and the quality produce available. "Good food is so accessible nowadays. We have such culturally diverse dining on offer, so it never gets dull, and it's available at a wide range of price-points," he says.

It's not only people's cuisine preferences that are met when they eat out, but also their desire for shared experiences. "People want social sophistication," says John Fink, creative director of The Fink Group, which owns Quay, Otto, Bennelong (pictured) and Firedoor.

"People might want fine dining, or something casual, or even a restaurant with the theatre of Sydney's Firedoor, but at the end of the day, I think everyone wants to go out and enjoy themselves. And now you can do that wherever you are in Australia."

For Justin Hemmes, chief executive of Merivale, a company that owns more than 65 restaurants, bars and pubs, the role of social media has played a part in where people choose to eat.

"Eating out is the greatest form of entertainment at the moment, and social media and the internet have played a huge role in that," he says. "Seeing amazing dishes on Instagram undoubtedly whets the appetite."

We are also becoming more discerning about what we expect from eating out. "Customers are very knowledgeable," says Hemmes.



SERVES YOU RIGHT We're more discerning about what we expect when we eat out, and this in turn raises the bar. Pictured: Bennelong

"Eating out in Australia is such a great social experience," he says. "There are interesting people, there's great design, and exceptional food and drinks. Fifteen years ago, eating out was reserved to Thursday, Friday or Saturday nights only. Now people are eating out seven days a week and at such a variety of fantastic restaurants."

With more than 40,000 restaurants and cafes across the country, we are spoilt for choice. So how do we navigate our way through the myriad options?

This question is part of the reason behind this week's launch of our *delicious.* Eat Out platform online. "We have built the most comprehensive guide to eating out in Australia because we know there is a demand for it," says McCallum. "We want to make it as easy as possible to find a good feed from a source people trust. And we have the network and the credibility of great local critics to be able to do this."

"Head online and search for whatever you are craving, wherever you are, at any time. Best of all, you can get involved - leave a review, read how chefs respond to the critics, and enjoy!" ★ *Looking to eat out? Use the site the experts use and visit delicious.com.au/eatout for Australia's best guide to eating out. With thousands of reviews and listings, you can search, locate and discover the right place, whatever you are craving.*